

The Florida State University
College of Arts and Sciences

The Architecture of Sex

By

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A Thesis submitted to the
Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts

Degree Awarded
Spring Semester, 2006

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abstract

This is a collection of poems.

The waves of death swirled about me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
—II Samuel 22:5

nativity

*I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
—T. S. Eliot, “Journey of the Magi”*

MARY SPEAKS TO JOSEPH

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

—Luke 1:38

The baby woke up giggling, levitated,
a column of blue air curling about him.
From where I slept, at the foot of your bed
I watched him open out like a red carnation
into his thirst and vinegar, the sleepers around him
when his sweat mingled with blood—
he is awake. There before me the plastic
crusade, his silence in the courtroom—
all in the blue air around him, electrified.
He is still. And he withered—a shrub, into the dust
of oldness, skin crumpling, shrinking,
until he was there again, our son, the shepherd
to our meandering flock, dropping to the cradle
like a leaf.

I am estranged from him, the flush of my womb—

*I thought, His blood rushes, forces
through the gumball heart, his red a thrashing
current, tearing through the little chest,
shuddering him, spasms banging like doll-sized
earthquakes, bouncing off his tiny ribs—
I thought, We've been sent a waiting explosion—
he ticks like a bomb—Can you hear it?
The heartbeat like a timer, twig, twig—*

Joseph, you've begun to glow—
like the angel—*Fear not, virgin
for you will be overshadowed—*
sighing out your prayers like smoke
from a candle doused.

Oh Joseph, Joseph,
I've noticed now how like a corpse
you slumber—how like a plum
plucked from the branch,
how sour and how syrup like a plum
how red your flesh and how sugared—
Twig, echo—
Joseph, do you feel the evening?

The sun heaving, the clouds falling jagged
to the east like flaming swords
turning every way—the magenta of sunset,
the last flicker of green on the trees
before the black, *the voice of charmers,*
charming—the darkness
a canopy crawling above our garden—

He would have seen his childhood
vanish in the morning, his blossom
collapsing to a vine, contracting to a bud—
We would have seen his blood, Joseph.
Why let it linger, like the taste of meat?
The little Isaac, I've forfeited him as the ram
on the altars I've cultivated,
his body a dying plant—

In Isaac shall the seed
drop—I've learned how like a plum
is sleep, how moist and fleshy—
how it is like slicing through leather
to arrive at, how red is the flesh
and how syrup.

I am melted away as waters—
the poison like the poison
of a serpent.

I'm by your side now, Joseph,
I'm kissing your eyelids
and pressing my hand into the red
of your chest and falling oh,
my head at your shoulder
and falling—how like a plum
is sleep, how ripe, how tender—

GOATSONG

*And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes,
and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.*

—Luke 2:7

And finally silence. The female gasped her last
and slumped on the feed, asleep.

Those groans...Unearthly, deep from the womb
so filled with blood, saliva; she squealed and screamed.

The baby blurted out of her with so much sweat
and fire, splashes of red and white.

He surfaced nearly purple, choking on the very
air, gasping, veins in his neck exploding, the eyes rolled

back. I forget now how it went—

was *he* born without his breath, or we?

She quivered, shrieked at the rope that tied them
and the male, his hands at his ears

roared, flying at her, seized the cord and ripped it
apart. The female hurtled, hit the ground—a wild force—

folding into herself, a dead spider. The male had
moaned and howled, eyes fixed

on her vomiting mouth—the tumor in his throat
writhing, he bellowed, ramming his temples, pressing in

with his quaking hands. In awe

we watched, unbreathing, dumb...Still.

And when she finally collapsed, the noise hacked
off, he also fell—head hitting dirt

and straw. Then was there silence. The quiet
scattered through the mud, out the night, into the earth

into, at last, our own ears. The infant would not
bleat—we listened for his breath

and did not hear it. But we saw the eyes, turning
shaking—tears, a slow trickle, infinite drip on the sludge

below him. What could we do?

Our tongues were dry, our hooves heavy.

The babe stirred, the wrists wriggled, the ankles
flapped. And the head circled—
 mouth agape, from mother to father, to the magi,
the shepherds, to us—his face swathed in the countenance

of the drowning. His tongue fashioned words
but we could not perceive them.

 We watched him writhe, his tiny bones and blood
submerging in the burgundy wet soil. The earth wrapped

around him, began to swallow
 this house of ours, the house we built, a temple of goats.

SHEPHERDS

*And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch
over their flock by night.*

—Luke 2:8

near Bethlehem the fire
hit our faces we huddled
like a knot the damp light
lifting into our eyelids
we breathed the smoke
swarming and watched
the gray vapor our breath
stared at the convulsions
of the flames cower flinch

in the orangepink streetlight I sway
under a black sky a smoke haze ascends
slumps, gray film rolling across my eyeballs

I twinged to be unburned
to have trickled the ash
water from wineskins
dribbled it like urine, but
remembered the nights we had
drunk, our bodies seeping
lower into the leaves
around us, the decay
we tossed in by handfuls

I stoop in the driveway, one car
the empty house yawning black,
one tan leaf blown somehow near me

I watched your throat
when the angels alit
up on our mountain
their strong feet an earthquake
a soft vee gold plaited
through their chests
the sheep ran I watched
you swallow, your fear
burning me hot red

the leaf crunches in my hand, I gulp
the feel of it around the root of my tongue
my palm chewing it dry brown to grit

we lurched forward
the angels charged us
shouting, I seized
your hand felt how dry

and warm we ran
the sheep left to thirst
alone, my thighs singed
as we raced down weeds
the terror of angels

I am flush with your memory the smoke
kisses the tiny geometry of my knuckles
my skin fills with ashes, your sighing breath

we hurried for shelter
I pressed my head against
my shoulder I pressed
my hand against my ear
the clamor angel voices
I wailed we ran hands clutching
found the manger
the eastern princes
bowing we tumbled inside

in the dark house I clasp my triceps
thoughts of your arms I feel how cold it is
here, you allowed then pushed me off

I guzzled air, huffing
on hands and knees
heard the roar an infant
on fire your body tightened
pressed your lips shut
around us crackling hay
dry cattle feed I grabbed
a piece gripped it in my palm
ground it in my hand

the rattle of the dryer my pajamas spin
timed dry high heat in minutes I will pull them
out they will be to me warmth

the little thing scorched
the air sweltered, free of you
my stomach boiled with ache
I saw your eyes the baby
wrapped around them
like a blanket you crawled
to him through smoke
the manger fire singed
everyone pulling in slowly

my eyes have filled with smoke
and hurt my bed hums my name I wait my pajamas
heating I am tearing them from your smell

the flames the baby
seared the air set smoldering

the hay around everyone
inching forward the parents
reached their hands they glowed
nodded their heavy heads
the world twisted inward
to fire to rest the goats
the walls yielded to the baby

sleep waits like a dry warm leaf on my bed but
I must cut away your name my eyes thicken but
I must finish I must kill you off

the ground moved
a slow swirl the light
swelled up I stood I faltered
where can I run? in the depths
he is there, burning
and stealing you out
scalding your memory out
from my body my body
is the memory of ashes

SIMEON

And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;
—Luke 2:34

Bring him sticks, Mary,
wood and nails, and let him hammer together
a sword. His forearms
may be fat with birth, but they can pound
and shape. He will make
a weapon as sharp as iron; bring him branches
and spikes.

The baby edges to them
like a claw, the wells of his round eyes rippling.
Your chest pulls in,
doesn't it. *Knife*. Your son scrapes the limbs
with his fingernails
and pushes in those metal thorns. He swerves it
with quaking knuckles.

I will lay down my cane
to him—he can strike it into a spear, and tie
the nails to the end of it.
Mary, I will no longer lean on my staff, I will
fall, stomach forward
splashing, onto that wood dagger. Let my blood
pool around your feet

and paint your toes—
This, Mary, this! Remember that you sliced
your index finger open
when you crawled your hands over the belly—
they were the sharps
of his teeth, Mary, and the razor eyelashes.
I leak out of the earth.

I will twitch this sword
from out of my body and shatter it through
the stone steps of the altar
and nail him to it, and gore his side and tap barbs
into his skull, and tremor
with a last giggle. Mary, I warn you, sink him
under deep mud and run fast away.

HEROD'S VISION

Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

—Matthew 2:7

after Guernica

the angel dove in, his eyes
flung together, squint—*strabismus*,
excelsis—the mouth stricken,
skin grown over the open gape,
his tongue muffled—(*I am Gabriel,*
that stand—)

(*lift up your eyes*)

(*here in Bethlehem*
a dazed bull, two-horned
and his screeching horse
smashing here are the four winds
cluttering the bodies
of the manger, blasting
the horse's legs
apart the hay whips
a pentagram on whose dead palm,
it has coursed into the horse's
tongue his belly
—“trodden under foot? And he said
unto me, Unto two thousand
and three hundred days; then
shall the sanctuary be cleansed”)

and light! his flying arm
has a kerosene lantern, the fingers
mashed awkward around it.

the innkeeper's wife trudged,
the arthritic knee dragging, the spine
folded over, a fibromyalgiac bow,
naked, through the door.
a shepherd's robe falls
from his shoulders, he flings up
his arms, fingers wide—*glorifying*
and praising—as if stretched
on a rack.

EXALT

Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib?

—Job 39:9

Terror spread through the night air
like thorns blooming, even the dirt
became sharp. I sped, my gallop
jagged on the hills near Bethlehem.
lightning hit the earth like daggers
toward Rama—there sliced
into my ears the bellow—wailing,
the screams of mothers scraping deep
into the red evening, the clouds
painted with some omen of blood.

Inside the manger, the storm roiling
above our heads, the child disgorged
his shrieks, the drained limbs thrashing,
his fingers stretched upward, past
the ceiling and the thunder that called
like a moaning father. All around
the howling—an alto's voice shattered
*labor engulfed me, this son
slouched in me like a basin of aching
of gore*—my horn quivered.

The magi knelt, their bodies jerking
as if a hand forced them down.
Their heads shuddered. Now
my abdomen jittering—the rain
had crawled into all our bodies
and infested: the sheep bleated
wildly, one of the puling donkeys
fell dead. My horn throbbed—
*both my boys have fainted, they shudder
with their eyes open, drooling.*

The warriors surround our city,
their horses hurtling through a pit.
I hear the rush of their swords
through small bones. The shepherds
have poured in, shouting.
The convulsing child, waves of pain—
I must bow to him
bow my head again
and bow, and bow my head
again, and again, and again

siren

STILL LIFE WITH RED FRUIT

With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him.

—Proverbs 7:21

Within the spasm of the second hand
I could rush to your puffed chest and rip it apart
with my sharp teeth, and gnaw
on the bones of your ribcage holding your heart
like a plum between long white fingers.

I could wrench open those ribs
and plunge my mouth in like a child splashing
for the stem of an apple, I could find
the aorta with my teeth and churn my laughter
to fill my stomach. My molars

could crunch into it, past the vinegar
of the thin rind, I could rupture
the flesh from the pit, and swallow each piece
like a fresh strawberry swathed
in pancake syrup. My bowled tongue

could saturate itself in the citric rust of your blood
and the last chunk could slither across
the shaking roof of my mouth,
slide down the throat, all red warmth.
I could lick my dripping wrists up to my palms.

Within one twitch of the clock
I could hurdle off this sofa and crash
and tear at you. I could devour you completely.
I want the trickle of you in my belly.
I want those red smirking lips.

SONG OF SOLOMON

*Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:
And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like
one of these.*

—Matthew 6:28b-29

What, should I force my hands on your chest?
Should I press my palms against your neck
like a potter's clay on the spinning wheel?

You turn like a world among stars: pucker
vomit, lick again, until slick and smooth,
a skin-colored vase, already kissed with lilies

their stems soaking in the waters of your stomach.

Even to travel there, through your esophagus
like a pioneer in the new galaxies, to your stomach
and small intestines; I should be like a sweet pastry

sugar melting in your mouth and bitten again
and again, gnawed upon by the mystery of your canines
the galaxies in your fingerprints; to be eaten

I should be like a robed flower scenting the wind

licking the air, my tongue waving in the breezes
the smell of lilies somersaulting in the afternoon
like a wheel spinning toward the nape of your neck

turning, circling your head, I am a vacuum to the air
siphoning it in until only I remain around you, like hands
forced against your chest. I am sugared air

pressing my fingers like roots in the soil of your chest

to be planted there among the stars. Will you accept
the offering? breathe me in and guide me through
and through your lungs, your veins, your capillaries

into your fingers? will you reach your hands
to the pastry box, undo the ribbon and pick me out
press me against your lips and open your mouth

like a vacuum? and will I offer?

FLATBED

Come, let us take our fill of love until the morning: let us solace ourselves with loves.

—Proverbs 7:18

The copy machine is spending my money
like one of those women with miniskirts
who know they've got me by the umbilical cord.

It's saying, "We'll do things *my way*,"
as its neon lights flash up and down;
Broadway, and fifth, everything I love about Vegas.

Shall I pay you with the dirtied paper?
The wrong-sized sheets
you rolled out from your bowels?

Your makeup's too dark here;
you're covering everything
with fishnet stockings, smeared mascara.

You double-sided paper whore,
you'll end up spitting out my sonnet
to the next guy in line, charging him the same 8 cents.

WOMAN TO MAN

There is the rattle of the stone heart against bone
when I clutch at his body, wrapping myself around
like strips of cold cloth—there is the clatter
of ice against ice stone. I am cold, too
when I touch him, ripple my fingers along his side.

*—there is the frost, his voice—the freezing needles
fingering the side of my neck, his lips an electric ice
my body jolting to stillness, rime—mr. jangles, clank
and clink flicker glide through like an eel
in a frozen lake, jangling by and shattering out—*

White winter shivers us, the arctic chill winding
whorling around, a tornado—I remember the blue flames
we lit, I can see them, miles in the distance, miles across
the ice floor, jingling steadily away, little bells
that fizz in the folds of the brain, glacier drops.

*—cover me a cold quilt, quiver your hand
about my jaw, we blanket each other in snow
and ice, fracture, chinks fissures snapping our skin
in splinters, our pieces crackling to the ground,
in the morning everything buried, except stone—
trembling stone*

MAN

core of worms, flies
maggots, *whore*—
sitting on the swivel chair
his stomach spinning *maggot*
the rocks of his thighs melt
a cat screeches in the street
in the black orange-lit
black. *whore*—seven demons
crouch around a corner,
seven clawtips light-scraping
his naked hip. chants.
hilt fizz hush hot slough luss
—*maggot*. a fly shizzes,
lands, legs wiping together,
on his tongue. *whore*.
his room fills with buzzing
as if a giant mouth
dribbles soda to the floor
a falls of syrup fizzing
maggot. the aorta blood
bathing fly-worms. night
like a wet black marshmallow
slides, smears across
the window-screen, the rub
of it a small siren. *whore*.

LULLABY THROUGH SUTURED LIPS

The fetus sewed itself together with a wooden needle and burlap thread. Limb to hip, wrist to fatty forearm, eyeball to eyelid. The larynx had to be swallowed, then the throat and burgundy tongue, and at last there was a whimper, then a snigger, a giggle, an opening of the chubby jaw, the chops.

The fetus went shopping at the supermarket, squeezed the nectarines and thumped the cantaloupes, always thinking about the woman, her deflating stomach, her womb like the center of a coconut.

The fetus relaxed the grocery bags on the counter as if they were newborn, found the woman's feet encased in green, bowled itself in her lap.

The fetus turned to blood and trickled, dribbled down the belly, the legs, the chair, the shoes. There wasn't any woman, no fetus neither. Only a green slipper with red sap.

A WITCH CAUTIONS

*thou shalt go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down; and he will tell thee
what thou shalt do.*

—Ruth 3:4b

You shall be to him a blanket, a laver
into which to drop his swelling ankles
his mud-sweat breaking in at you—

Ruth, you will be to him a footstool
of whom he will say, Swear not by her
but by the big throne in which I sit.

You will wash the toes with your hair
and when he hurls you into the gray dawn
you will find nothing but the dirt flood

and turn back to him, he who sent you.
And should you, backing up and bending
to the fiery brass angel ahead, crush

his foot against a wall, he will thrash
and who will raise your voice from out
the dark animal recesses your throat?

You will paint your face and dream
out of the window, and he will tread
over you, sprinkling your blood

on the walls of your house, singing
through calm reeds, Throw her down.
Lay with him, Ruth, uncover you.

MIDNIGHT

Behold, I stand at the door,
—Revelation 3:20a

Rain taps against my roof
splashes into puddles near the window—
yet. The water will not slither into the room
lick my eyelids, splash my throat.
The bed is dry, the darkness arid
and my tongue, a desert
fuses to the roof and jaw.
You are my water, the rain drizzling
above my ears, the seconds we spend
like tiny taps on a long-closed door
and the calm that follows.

the architecture of sex

So Gad came to David, and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Choose thee
—I Chronicles 21:11

I.

Viscid water fills the orchestra in silence
bleeding in through the fissures of stone
beneath our toes. The sounds change
through the murk liquid, thick as saliva
and crawling—the chorus shrieks, rats,
our feet and fingers tick, a tiny clatter
of cockroaches trickling in. Swamp swallows
the players, envelops them in grease,
embryonic fluid, the sap of birth
hazes over eyes, slurs about
in slimy currents. A bubble from the nose
halts, stagnant where it emerged. The dizzy
hush of muted notes—and the hooves of goats—

a black crumb flicked off a t shirt—red, and tight—
the soft dents like bruises on a pear, where his shirt
presses against the areolae. *ekkaio*. I exhale his name
and coldness touches its fingers on the left and right
ventricles of my heart I breathe in the cold—*I'll tell you*.
he chews, his shaved jaw back and forth, a saw
for scraping, I could bleed my cold tongue over it,
I'll tell you, about the swamp. the room fills
with sharpness the weight of snow rushes heavy
on my throat, constricting. I feel the thornbush crawling
as it grows, its roots firm in my armpit. *It's cancer*.
I've decided to lie.

I will fall now and fall into the murk water
the place of water-flies and weevils, the brackish grease
of the swamp, the olive grease like grease of fishes—
the flood strikes the belly heaves itself
through the legs through the hollows of the ribs *darkness*
rushes between our stones the dead living liquid
fingered, forced into a pulse of mourning, a howl
from the depths and a moaning *the current*
thrusts warm through the loins the current is red
a red knife blade in the olive flow the stagnant olive pools
eddy slow with the stirring of maggots

we are carried by the fluid the surging
of our own bodies lashing, epileptic, the one called
sickness scraping his stomach with a dagger,
and the others, *Quick little splinters of plague*
sweating out their bitter heat, vomiting their names
into the dark water, lines of white flung through it
like veins, liquid lines motionless in the thick
slime, the one called *sword* panting in the water
his hand clutching a piece of torn flesh—
and the swamp *swaying, swaying, O so deep*
so fathomlessly black and spurting suddenly up

White marble tiles like frost
on the naked feet. Mirrors
without walls. Mentor
swoops
her arms and thighs, swirls the air.
“It helps if you close your eyes.”
I close them. I distinguish
swamp.

She lilts. “You’re wading in slime,
olive water, you’re plodding through
and stirring up those seafloor
feelings:
the screams and arrows, the lips licking
the mutters, the sweat, the whimpers.”
I whimper, I sweat, I lick
lips—

Mentor summons pulse to fingertips
my blood scuttles to her like a crab.
She is a waterfall, smooth
and chilled,
her chest and legs—waves ebbing
and flowing as she resounds
she hums and purrs, she sings
and chants.

“Can you taste it? Broken glass.
The heaving the rhythm the throb
ice chips on the tongue. The
throat
a slough trickling, dripping

down, lower down to the belly—”
My stomach boils, it quakes
it mires, it fills with murmuring
bile—

orexis watch your hand against
his door orexis *thus* your palm
on pressed the planks *thus*
breathing a soft air just outside
on a porch of rotted wood—
wind on you when you run
away but orexis stands *thus*

II.

tragoidia. Yessir, it's a house of flies,
the black air humming with the wings
and fleshy black bodies of flies.

You'll see it, when they line up
body on body just so, a gap between them,
the light beyond the black whirring ceiling

before the eclipse of wings
eats away, the black droning
swallowing, devouring.

it is a vine reaching thorn by thorn into the crevices
of muscles, the groin, the abdomen, eventually to
the forearms, the fingers chipping at each other,
thumb to thumb clicking. *I have cancer*.
I have cancer. and his mouth turns, in a wipe,
to stone, his brown-spotted eyes still, grape-green.
he is aged bronze, the skin of his cheekbones and forehead
eaten with acid, rotted, cratered, flaked away
and a rectangle carved in the right neck flexor, *sterno*—
he dissolves into a black bronze night, blurs
through veils of dark maroon, or the fog paints him
for a moment, the solid ghost blue of the deep.

and wind is a broken linnet spinning, a ripple
in brine water, brown frond dropping from a palm tree,
horseflies blinking, buzzing wind recoils
from the swamp it is the hurricane eye, of liquid,
the deep black, the salt mire of it covering us,
hurling its olive green over us in pools of bile
and we flap our muted splashing underneath the surface
twitching our backs in a swim, the one called *envy*
clawing his fingers on the back of some other,
to carry him on and the bacteria drag us all to the deep
to the low algae floor slipping our feet, slime-ridden

III.

“The swamp is in your stomach—
are you remembering to breathe?”
Mentor trickles to the white marble
crosses her legs and closes her eyes.
She puckers her thumb and naked ring finger.
I remember to breathe. I feel the swamp
gurgling, circling in my stomach.
“Notice that you steal the cool air here
and it warms in the body—when it exits
your open mouth, it is steam.”
I learn the warmth, the wetness of breath.

“What are you feeling? what thoughts
are churning through the swamp? One
collects itself into a toad, and splishes
jumps! to the gullet, mumbles the sound—
*hu—the grunt of gushing release, the emotion
like a bubble rushing to the surface, exploding
from the mouth—hu—like a droplet
falling to the swamp—hu—a drop
of green olive water—hu—hu—*”
I taste the water, the drop, the toad, the bubble.
I resonate, I pluck a *hu* from my abdomen.

in the glass I saw green eyes, like fire, lit pupils
and quaking lips, my own open jaw and behind it—
but the swimmers frenzied round my feet like chains
fixed *wreathed, strong weed round the knees*
and the darkness rushes us downward the one
called *fear* leaped to my neck and pressed his tiny hands
on my shoulders one flicked a yellowed claw
and ripped my armpit *pestilence* we dove
into the brine, water-crows, flurried away
from the cabin the damp wood the fire-jade
like cords around my eyelids tearing at them

orexis orexis the beginning of an *o* on his mouth, my name,
youth, *anticythera* let him lull a hypnosis his left eye
moving in and the flesh of the face his stomach *rectus*
abdominis charred, scratched with fire, the thigh *rectus*

femoris cut, a square and his lips crease down
the round base of the cheeks, the tension a twitch—inside
the skin a strained pull, the left *depressor angula oris*
wrenching down the left *depressor labii inferior*
tightening as a claw—and now a clean chiseled
slice on the left lower lip, a *w* forming—an *o*
is a *w*— *we can*— the words wash out—
he is shipwrecked—*anticythera*— *we can work*

who found him in the dirt underwater, *anticythera*,
the body shattered to handfulls— here, *latissimus dorsi*,
here, *thoracolumbar*, here, *inguinal*, his ligaments
thrown to salt, saltwater— who pieced him together,
a metal rod through his core, where his stomach
should be and his esophagus— he is only his
muscle, he is only the bones that meet his skin—
sternal ribs, carpus— and his stretch to moves
so steadily so like a hewn rock rolling over
a tomb the weight of his muscled arm, the *brachii*
a gray stone loaf of bread, and his irides flattened
and black ringed— he has copper in his mouth

Planetlike, the deltoid. The arm
stretches, the shoulder rotates
like a planet on the axle of the humerus
spherical and turning as a finger points.

Or perhaps the shoulder is an apple
formed soft and round—tender
like a ripening fruit, stretching the skin
as it ages on the branches of the scapula.

they fall into me they press
small hands wide out pushing on the bones
of my ribs forcing down
the thyroid cartilage adam's apple
their lips slick, algae
on the trapezius my left shoulder
the one called *need* bites the clavical
suckling their feet
on the *gastrocnemius* their toes
the claws digging

“Hu,” I say. I echo and resound. “Hu.”
The white marble is cool. It chills my feet.

*I've seen her cross-legged in the mirrors
gazing, her stare knives through my pupils.*

The skin around my ankles tightens, the ice
is weight on my feet like cold metal.

“What does your ‘hu’ mean?” she asks,
she lengthens the curve of her back—

Chainlike, the spine. Each vertebra
a link. The arms extend
the spine lengthens
like a chain being tugged upon.

Or perhaps the back is an arch
chiseled in the academy
among Grecian faces gathered.
“Today we learn Gemini.”

orexis he reaches clutches
an invisible round air his words
his tongue moving *warm*
is a choice to be warm
orexis this is a trap this is a sharp cage
this is only one of three

IV.

Elias dropped the 30 meters, only a cord
connecting him to the surface of water. He has returned—
*they were ghosts, he says, naked women naked
men rotting in their syphilis.* He has returned
with an arm. It is not syphilis. It is some other
disease, the slow corrosion of bronze.

the one called *famine* took my wrist and pulled
down on me, *the bog-suck like a whirl-pool,*
and the living soil of water-beetles ticked
at my feet the swamp digs inward, carrying
in it *the slow cold flame like a flickering cancer*
into the blood and the swamp waters around me
fill with dark motionless red above the surface
the moon falls on blood, slippery and white,
and below the shadows eat through *the joists*
and girders of the body at the base of the skull
the lower brain is enveloped in thick grease

the face reconstructed from within, the lips
reconstructed. they are a trap—
we can work through the problem
we go deeper than cancer goes— the skin
ripped at the *serratus anterior*, the ribs pressing
the muscle bronze-purple. his body igneous, rough
cratered rock he is fissuring, muscle broken
like stone, fractures climbing through him, through
the thigh, the *vastus lateralis* splitting, breaking apart
the *tensor*. he pushes, stumbles the left forward, steps
heavily, the weight of bronze clamping against him,
his right foot lifting, the arm extending—

I teem with water
it seeps into my eyes
between my fingers
presses and prods
until it has my lips
my tongue within its clinch

V.

A giant telescope lolls on tiled ground.
 And the room is wallpapered with charts
as large and full as two bodies reached around,
 charts of stars. The astronomer starts,
astronomer buzzes, his words coming down like a flood.

“IN THE GREEN chasms of the sky
 the deep sea black between the galaxies,
within the straights that you and I
 will map with our astronomies—
between them, I say, swirl sawdust grains.

For you breathe and you take in
 molecules of weak airy water; in the black
there are also grains invisible, forsaken
 by the telescope’s strict track
from light to light, from present star to present star.

And I can occult the giant Al Hena
 five times the diameter of the sun,
travel vast compression waves to Dirah—
 between them slither splinters in disunion
aching, winding together, the waves winding them together.

This is a vacuum in sky, attracting
 by its gravity, more—the slivers of space
snatched together, clenched, compacting,
 shackled, the flecks of wood set in place
and building: now splinters of bark, now floating twigs

and branches, a nest, a knot of sticks,
 the air between compressing, and two seeds
grow in the center. And you, children, fix
 them in your mind, for he that heeds
my words has hope, for they will scatter through the dark.

The vacuum perceives them, too
 and when it does, the dust bound, the nodes
fastened in, the black air buzzing, and you,
 years distant, watching—the vacuum explodes
into a blaze of fire, light, speed, a hurricane

of light. And the shift of it
pummels through the deep green
gulfs, and the force of it
stirs the night between us, the marine
layers of the universe, water hovering over the galaxies.

The explosion is a wave, and the waves
wind new dust together, and the seeds have exploded
and fall shattered in the new twigs, their staves
already forming, the black sky eroding, eroded
to white, and the stars will fill the sky, fill it up,

for what does Pliny say, but
OUT of the firmament by night,
there was seen a light, and what
does Pliny say, but *the night seemed as light*
as day. And oftentimes besides, yea, and oftentimes besides."

The star is a spark.
Someday it will burn the universe
out.

no reach but a hex and I lift *take his hand*
orexis no stretch but a curse I step toward
his slender forearm his hand a claw *take his hand*
thus I let my hand against his the fingers
the index his fingerprints cut mine through his lips
curl up his canines glint, they are sharp
and the blood I smell the blood of rabbits
the lines of my palms fill with swamp water it
pours through the ducts into the scars on my back
into the lines of my eyelids into my open mouth
my gums eroding my eyes covered over
the liquid blurs him out I cannot see him he is not
there I am touching only olive water
the bacteria rushing there is gasping, humming
and hot currents on my ankles fire swims across me
they come to my body they tie their limbs
around my own the water hurling in a thick haze I cannot breathe

Funny how one drowns
how every atom fights, how the body
seizures, how the stomach quakes
and the eyes tremble. The hands
reach for the surface, they stretch
and quiver.

I've heard the drowning
will grab at anything, how whatever
brushes their hand they will clasp
and chain, pull in the water.
The drowning will take others
with them.

Hu the spark. The flash of light.
We sit on the white marble, staring
into mirrors. "What is your 'hu?'"
she asks, she stares into my eyes
unfolds fingers to my face.

My blood is churning like the swamp.
What is the *hu*? What is the *hu*?
I reach, I widen pupils, I scour
the black for flecks of white, I gape
into the fire-jade, I shake.

There is no light anymore the sky
is blotted out—*In the green*—
What is the *hu*? *In the*—
My body corrodes, shreds apart
a mute clatter of bones on the algae

below, and the darkness lifts up
the severed feet, the ankles crumbling
to dust—*In the*—the swamp spreads
past the shore leaking into the earth
around it to the horizon closing in—

In the—my muscles dissolve,
flake off in the tearing salt—*In the
beginning* my fingers tense to
the surface pointing all to name
the stars, but there is no surface—

In the beginning the swamp trickles,

seeps to the ends of the universe
the lights above it extinguished and I
am only a crumbling body of parts
I am poured out poured in the current

carrying *In the beginning God* and
darkness on the deep awash
and a glow hovers over the wet
the beginning God created the waves
stilled down we are not

the heaven and the earth And the earth
without form darkness upon
the face of the deep And the Spirit
of God moved upon the face of the waters
moved upon the face of the waters

voices from water

COLD SEPTEMBER, MY BIRTH

Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.

—Job 3:3

There are shivers through the side of her face
like a beaten dog
 guarding with her forearms the rounded belly
a bowl of blood fingers stretched as webs
around this fleshy house without electricity anymore
 or running water but the stagnance
and the smell of vomit swirling
 The baby inside her would cry
if he were not already dead wrapped around himself
 a knot of soft bones
 There is moonlight creeping through windows
the tips of its fingers brush her stomach

 At night she sings to him still
the child will not kick clap his small palms
He is silent She sings
your father left us, he left us, flew out the door
 in a hurricane it felt like this
She jiggles the womb There is the noise of skin
at skin. *The night you were conceived*
 she scratches wants to rip it open
I saw him scoop up his clothes as you and I lied
 in our nightgown he flew away
She twists to one side takes the pillow cover
 between her teeth and chews and cries

After she pushes him out the jumble ribs
 toes knees round soft skull
 the floor creaks under her, she walks
with swollen feet the other side of the room
biceps still tight She is tired thighs wobble
She is thirsty the deep moan
 to the rope she tied
up one heavy foot the stool trembles up the other
 A cough or the floor mutters
She imagines a cliff her hair blown off the sweat
feels the wind around her neck and jumps
 I was the baby

PRAYERS

Pray without ceasing.

—I Thes. 5:17

“Send it, *send it*—” The highway flashes green,
tree leaves flickering, jade billboards rush
with wind.

The highway speaks in wisps of air, the open window
a medium through which the green earth preaches.

The grass quivers. “The sun is no sooner risen
with burning—”

The heat today! Such hot, static air. The sun chars
the bare roads. White clear sky and an acrid glare—
the unbearable heat, hateful—thrusting its strong arm
through heaven

clasping the car in its fist, squeezing it to a sphere
of twisted, rusting metal, the car squeals, cries.

“It was water that did it, that dug
with needles at my skin
water that pierced the surface, rain and salt
ripping, scratching through my yellow peel.”

He laughed at the thought of it: even the car
was a lemon—“Life is *sour!*” He shrieked, whinnied
whined, “life is bitter. Send it, *send it*—” and again
he screamed, a reedy voice: “*Send it*—”
shrill, sharp, weak desires:

Late last night, streetlights staining the walls
as he twisted and distorted under sheets, sweat
creeping from the lining in his stomach out thin, filmy
skin, gossamer—

If the lights were lit, you could decipher the veins,
the layers of slight, gangling muscle, the lines
of bones and tiny hairs in the wrists, like cursive script:

“*cut. slice. sliver. divide.*” The violence, however—
he is too frail, too weedy *and blood so wet*—
No, the streaks on arms are not speeches but charts,
an atlas, streetmap—

His flimsy carcass deformed, spindled rubber bones.

He hurdled off the cot and heaped the notebooks
like a decaying harvest in his rank embrace
a stagnant stench of fat and grime, plaque, sewage
mess, muck

He's in boxers, skinny skin sallow, white
chest concave, brittle ribs, the tongue on fire—
“forgive us our sins; for we also—”
sixteen—*tick*, the turn signal green, green
the world in green, ten—Fire approaching.
A ball of fire, a world.

WALKING OUT

and aren't his fists curled
 tightly about my kidneys
and vines sprout
 thorned
 my stomach shreds open
a tangle of spikes
 he grows up inside me
 as a black plant, a root
 out of my blood

my spine barbed
 my bones split
and shatter to points
 the spear
 in my side
and aren't his teeth out
 he clicks his canines
 punctures through
 the liver casing

I am caged in his sharp skin
 the claws scratching
my head fills with veins
 that splinter
 into needles stinging
they leak warm
 he stretches himself
 inside, yawning out
 his slashing

I snap my teeth together
 red seeps through
he pulverizes
 I press my hands
 one at the other
he rips me apart
 outside grew brambles
 when I walk away
 my toes slice up

briars tangle the path
 stairs I cannot
cross the burdock
 if there were a gate
I would go through it
if a shepherd
 I would stamp along
 his footprints
but the garden
beyond it locks itself

PETER IN THE STORM

This Jesus' feet solid
on the water above my head
the lashing waves—He stands
steady he's come back
who is this *Jesus* who—
Come, he says. I walk above myself
into the air over saltwater—
still like panting through a wet napkin—
my body sinks below me.
His hands now the scars
through his wrists—I want
the palm of his hand
heavy on me he slumps
and grabs the arms—mine, reaching up
he connects the body—mine
to that part of me balanced at his side
I surge I climb he whispers
or he calls forth, I toss off the clothes
that clutch to my stomach—the day is long
I want to sleep again—Come, he says.
I hear him over the waves
they overtake me, salt, salt
I am my own voices sinking
dispersed, melted in the ocean—
it thrashes all the pieces of me
through it. He waits for me to collect
my arms to reach at
this water, that I thirst not—
but my body is not an arm
or a leg or a waterpot or a rib
—all empty, and not even eyes,
only salt flung across a sea
I am only voices from water
and many I am water calling to him
—Come, and he hears and stays, his feet
flexed but soft, his toes
tapping the surface as he stands
like a cross planted
on the top of a crumbling church
in the rain.

WAITING

The flowers grow more, in Spanish,
the words—*me hace falta*,
opening from their dirt, in the lungs
and burgeoning, putting forth
their shoots and vines
and the warm fragrant,
filling the chest with vapors
an incense of petals trickling
and cycling through my body.
Those words—*you make in me*
a hollow.

Hot water fills
around my tongue, scented
and swirled with milk and honey.
My mouth is a cup to drink from
but there is only
the copy of your name scribbled
on a receipt and now
the dreams that quilt over me.
I slouch in the softened panic
of drowning, my body
bludgeoned, punched with brass,
through my scalp, my stomach.
The stun of darkness—
I boil in my own blood,
the pond of it running
circling through my lips, holding
still the shape of your name
the last movement of the tongue
when I call at your pictures
from this heated, salty ocean—the *ll*
of *tell*, or *love*, the empty word,
or *allow*.

I holler my arms
through the water, I roar for you
to lift me from it,
your veined muscles coming down
upon me, around the neck
torn by salt red water
and screaming. Even one week
and I suffocate from it
the hole in me like a bullet's path
through, you walked off
where they speak Spanish

and already I thrash in the gulf—
come back, come quickly.

IN EXHAUSTION

the mascara—
 syrup string—seeps
 off and across the cheekbones
 down in pillows.

*Better, you would say,
 to pluck the eye, to claw
 the socket*

*stretch and cut
the cords connecting,
 better to rip them out
 to bleed forth—
 or I will fling you*

*into the fire
 already licking
 your soft ribs, the flames
 pressing fingers
against your lungs—
 better to break
 your knees, heaving
 the splintered cross,*

*better to run, your bones
 shattering, grating
 sliver at sliver—*

*or I will vomit
when your gnarled name
 thrusts in front of me
 bending, blinking—*

*I will hurl you
away. But I can't
 feel you as I swell
 when the wind hits
 my triceps—*

*I can't hear you as I hear
 the wind howl
 as if it ached
 for someone*

*to find it—Jesus,
 I fall to my bed
 and sink, and an ocean
 folds around me.*

I waste
as the delphinia, jumbled about
on their stems, rotting.

The dreams
crawl to the warm body
and drizzle
thread upon thread
a web
around me, the intricate coffin,
scuttle to my ears
and crinkle
their legs wrapping under
their bodies,
eyes glowing blankly.
They gnash
their teeth in a song, a warbling,
remember the boy's
chest, slabs
of rock like tombstones—
remember
his stomach, wooden,
the stretch
of his lined shirt, his proud body,
remember the shadows
curled under
his eyelids, how he moaned
when they
giggled about his height—
everyone
at the theater filled with breath
and he strolled easily
across stage—
the dreams purr over my lips.
My body
twists in and puckers,
a bud

blossoming, light
blue blush—Jesus,
who have I in earth but you?
and who is mine
to hold his feet
in my unfolding palms
to rest my lips at his toes?
But I creep away,
a withering branch
and you are the vine—
I stretch, my arms trembling
out, and off.

And who is my father
 but yours? the hover
 of his wings: the wind a wall
 staying the water
that surrounds me.
 The scarlet seats
 at my sides yawned
 their emptiness.
I dove my hands
 to my shoulders—
 to hide a son between
 these biceps!
or a leg, or the tired boy
 sauntering out—
 as you must moan for me,
 your throat as scrape
tongue dried out—
 but I cannot hear,
 the pound of this echo
 against the cavern
inside me, shout,
 reverb—*Jesus—friend!*
 I sought and saw nothing
 in the dark urn
your absence, the dark
 stage your absence,
 the boy loiters at the wings—
 Be mine, Lord.

COVER, SPRING

You spoke a cloud into being, filled the throat
 swallowed the puffed air
and it vibrated your whole body, the forearms
 and the toes trembling
like rainclouds, the wet of it washing through
your coughing mouth
your watery lips. You said *white* and the world
 became cloud-covered,
gray and the rain gathered around it like a chain
 constricting, swarmed
 and muddied the place. And why then
should I close my eyes
when your chest begins the deep gush
 of *black. black. black.*

Ezekiel's valley, I clattered through the bones
 a collar, a finger—my feet
dried, my skin tightening. You must have begun
 with my skeleton, lightly
snapping me into being, from the mist pouring
from your throat, you sang
me into the world, your tongue flooded in warm
 honey. You rattled me
awake, stretched tendon to ulna, soleus to calcaneus.
 Your palm held me
 up. These bones, standing quiet, slumped
under your strong wings—
My stomach was a stone—you hollered
 for wind! and tumbled me about.

LORD I plant my feet into your soil, five toes
 five seeds digging past
the top of a muddy field, I roll downward
 I heat in the damp ground.
You wave me into a sprouting leaf, you whistle
forth, you channel a river
through my skin, you spread my ankles
 to a gurgling stream, you
break the mist and shatter it to shards of the day
 I rush my hands out
 I giggle the leaves, they dazzle, flutter—
The air is chocolate, I fall
drowsy in your earth, I sleep, my arms flung,
 pears, plums, peaches, grapes.

biographical sketch

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